

Technical Communications in Cambridge

Local perspectives of technical communicators working in this vibrant and dynamic city

Cambridge has a history of educational and technological excellence that dates back to the 17th century. At the heart of a high-technology centre known as Silicon Fen, Cambridge is host to several thousand companies, many of which employ technical communicators.

This article explores the perspectives of authors working in this vibrant city.

Cambridge - a centre of innovation and diversity

Cambridge is a centre of business and technological innovation. It has close ties to the university community and has received considerable business investment over the past three decades. The Cambridgeshire area is now one of the most important technology centres in Europe and claims to have the second largest venture capital market in the world, after Silicon Valley.



The Cambridge Science Park, where many technical writers are employed

Cambridge city is well located, with excellent transport links to Stansted airport and London to the south, Birmingham in the west, Peterborough in the north and Ipswich in the east. The rural setting, access to a highly skilled labour market and the relatively low cost of living in Cambridgeshire has attracted many entrepreneurs, businesses and IT staff to the area.

Cambridge city has two major business centres: a science park and a business park, both situated in the north of the city, just off the A14, and employing several thousand workers. In addition, there are dozens of smaller business parks scattered in and around Cambridge. The Cambourne business park, only 6 miles west of Cambridge, is located in a new satellite town. The Melbourne business park is to the south of Cambridge, near Royston. New business centres have sprung up in the surrounding villages, such as the Vision Park in Histon, and small business parks in Quay and Swaffham Bulbeck, Fordham and Comperton.

There are a wide range of technology companies and a diversity of businesses. Cambridge has unique strengths in electronics, pharmaceuticals, biotechnology and chemistry. Many other companies, in banking, finance, telecommunications and software design have headquarters or development branches. Examples of well-known companies with local development centres include ARM, Autonomy, Silicon Radio, Citrix, GE (General Electric), Symbian, Accelrys, Toshiba, Broadcom, QUALCOMM, WorldPay,

Vodafone, Sagentia, Telindus Surveillance Solutions and RedGate. All these companies employ technical writers.

Technical writing jobs in Cambridge

The precise number of technical writers in Cambridgeshire is unknown, although there may be as many as 150-300 employed in tasks such as editing, technical writing, marketing writing, copywriting, illustrations, translation, user interface design and other related services. The Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators (ISTC) has recently started a group in Cambridge, although at the moment numbers are small.

Salaries tend to be competitive, but slightly lower than London.

Living in Cambridge

Many technical writers live in Cambridge city. For those living in the city, cycling or walking into work is common. Cambridge has a good cycling infrastructure, with cycling lanes throughout the city and plenty of parks and green spaces. Cycling is part of the ethos and way of life of Cambridge residents.

Another reason why many choose to cycle is the narrow roads in Cambridge, which tend to become clogged with traffic at rush hour.

The cost of living has pushed many writers out into the surrounding villages, which offer good access to the city and surrounding business parks. Milton is a relatively new development just north of the A14, within cycling distance of the science park. Histon, Comperton, Cambourne, Sawston, Great Shelford, Waterbeach, Bottisham and Swaffham Prior are some of the other areas where technical writers live. As employees have migrated out to the satellite villages, new businesses parks have sprung up in these areas.

In general, commuting into work is only practical using private transport. The public transport system in and around Cambridge is slow and impractical. A guided bus service is planned to connect Cambridge and Huntingdon, to ease some of the traffic problems on the A14. There is currently talk about introducing congestion charges to Cambridge.

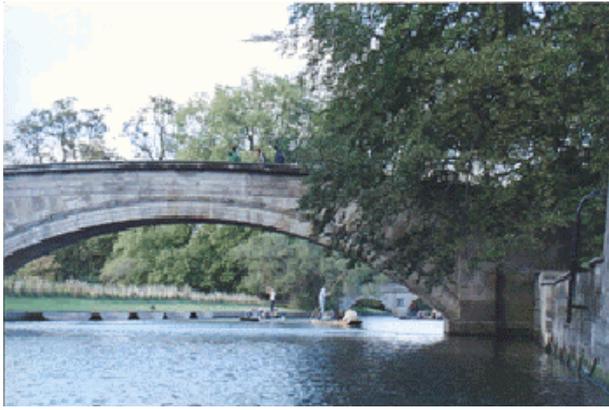
Cambridge has excellent rail links with London, which is only 40 minutes away on the fast train. This has given the opportunity for many writers to commute daily between London and Cambridge. Other writers travel into Cambridge from further off, for example Ipswich and Norwich.

Perspectives

Lisa Chapman, technical author, General Electric:

“ I have lived in Cambridge 14 years. Finding work in Cambridge has been relatively easy.

I have never been a lover of cities but Cambridge is beautiful in that it has everything you need but is quite compact. I am also a lover of water and enjoy wandering along the tow paths in Cambridge and Ely, chatting to ducks!



Views of the Cambridge river

A lot of people find Cambridgeshire dismal because of the flatness, but I like being able to see far into the distance wherever I am. It certainly makes cycling easier too.”

David Hollis, A&O Consultancy Ltd:

“I’m on my second contract in the Cambridge area. There currently seems to be plenty of scope for technical authors around Cambridge. I just wish that commuting up the M11 was easier, although I’m very glad I don’t use the A14 towards Peterborough!”

Roger Kirkham, Cambridge Technical Communicators:

“As with so much of life, working in Cambridge as a technical writer had good and bad points.

There is a buzz in the air as you wander around some of the larger business estates, especially as these enterprises represent innovation and are quite literally developing the future. On a practical level at least some of them will need to employ technical writers. Cambridge does have its downsides too. Much of the high-tech developments are on the edge of the town, so day to day there’s little sense of being connected to ‘tourist’ Cambridge; the one the students experience and the tourists come to see. There’s also the perennial problem of any ‘boom town’; the infrastructure hasn’t been developed sufficiently to cope with the expansion; shopping on a Saturday can be a fraught experience, and driving home every evening can be frustratingly slow

The combination of a medieval university town surrounded by a ring of high tech companies may make Cambridge unique.”

Paul Dufeu, Consultant:

“I have visited Cambridge occasionally for years, but it wasn’t until I worked here that I appreciated the open spaces, and the way that cycling and walking are a way of life for many people here. I enjoy being able to walk across



Shopping with the family in Cambridge

the common into town, almost without seeing a car. There's a real sense of community in Cambridge.”

Amanda Atkins, Consultant:

“Cambridge is one of the best places for technical writers in the country. It's a technology centre with the advantage of being close to London, whilst retaining its own character.

Although Cambridge has a high cost of living the pay is good and if you're prepared to commute to London, then the rewards can be higher still. Public transport links in Cambridge aren't so great, so a bike and/or a car is a must!

I think it's a place that can hold enough interest for writers of any experience. New graduates will enjoy the cosmopolitan atmosphere and proximity to London, experienced authors will enjoy the quality of family life and ongoing career opportunities.”

Famous figures associated with Cambridge

This includes eminent scientists like William Harvey, Isaac Newton, Charles Darwin, Ernest Rutherford, Steven Hawkins, as well as writers such as Virginia Woolf, C.S Lewis, John Milton and William Wordsworth, and many more who have studied or lived here.

Find out more

To find out more about the business and science parks:

<http://www.cambridge-science-park.com/home.htm>

<http://www.cambridge-business-park.co.uk/>

<http://www.colc.co.uk/cambridge/cambridge/history.htm>

To find out more about Cambridge:

<http://www.visitcambridge.org/>

www.cambridge.gov.uk

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cambridge>

To join the local Cambridge discussion group, contact Rachel Potts at cambridge_techcomms@yahoogroups.com

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